



The Little Things by LizzySong

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Family, Hurt-Comfort

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Joyce B., Max M., Steve H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-14 22:47:01

Updated: 2017-11-19 11:13:21

Packaged: 2019-12-17 04:55:52

Rating: T

Chapters: 6

Words: 6,299

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The kids decide it's their turn to take care of Steve, with a little help, and he couldn't be more confused by the turn of events. (a Steve Harrington sickfic)

1. Max

Author's Note: I got a request on my tumblr to do a fic where Steve gets sick and the kids subtly do little things to take care of him until he eventually realized that he's the one being babysat and not the other way around -- and since I myself am sick as a dog at the moment, I thought it would be fun to make Steve suffer with me.

Hope you enjoy!

He was waiting outside in the parking lot to pick up the kids from school.

Ever since that night two months ago, Steve and the kids -- including El and Will -- had become close. The children seemed to view him as an older brother, and he certainly thought of all of them as younger siblings.

So it was no surprise that Steve had become the designated babysitter for these six kids.

Just then, said children -- minus Eleven-- came running out to greet him. They were all excitedly speaking at once, and Steve couldn't make out most of what they were saying.

"Okay, okay," he said loudly, speaking over them. "One at a time -- Max, go," he said, smiling a little.

The kids each told him their pressing news one by one, and Steve listened to them with a proud smile on his face.

"Okay," Steve said when the kids finished, "Who's turn is it to ride shotgun?"

"Mine!" Max said eagerly.

"Well, get in then," he said gesturing to the car behind him. Max got in the passenger seat, and the boys piled in the back.

Steve began to drive, heading for the cabin where Hopper and Eleven

lived.

Max looked down at the floor of the car, where she'd put her skateboard, and noticed something she thought was strange.

There were wrappers strewn about her feet. Two things about this struck her as odd, the first was that Steve Harrington's car was never messy -- it was a point of pride with him -- and the second was that they didn't look like candy wrappers. Then she realised, they were from cough drops.

She looked at the boy who was driving and noticed that he looked more pale and tired than usual.

Max sighed and leaned back in her seat. She shouldn't be surprised -- it was January, and it seemed like half of Hawkins was sick. But the thought of Steve being sick bothered her.

She'd started staring at him closely, and this time he noticed. "You okay?" he asked, glancing at her before returning his gaze to the road. "Yeah," she said, giving him a pointed look. "I'm fine."

Steve gave her a look mixed with confusion and amusement. "...Okay, weirdo," he said and smiled, tussling her hair.

He turned his attention back to the road, and Max turned around in her seat to look back at the boys, wondering if they'd noticed the slight raspiness in Steve's voice, or that he seemed more tired than usual.

They hadn't. They were distracted, excitedly chattering about a lot of science mumbo-jumbo that she didn't understand.

Max rolled her eyes and turned back around, staring at the road ahead of them.

Eventually they drove into the forest, parking far enough away from the cabin that they wouldn't be considered connected. From there it was only a short walk.

As she was getting out of the car, Max opened the glove compartment and grabbed a hand full of the cough drops from the bag Steve was

keeping in it. She knew he'd be needing them later, and that he wouldn't want to admit it -- this was the guy who lead them through a tunnel filled with alien monsters while he had the shit beat out of him, after all.

"Hey kiddo, you comin' or what?" Steve called to her. He and the boys were already out of the car and waiting for her.

Max quickly stuffed the lozenges into her pocket and grabbed her skateboard, getting out of car a shutting the door behind her. "Yeah, I'm coming. Sorry," she said, walking over to the boys.

"You sure your okay?" Steve asked, and Max nodded her head in response. "Yeah, I'm fine."

2. Will and El

Will was the next to notice something was off. Steve usually wasn't this quiet, not that he was a generally chatty person, but he seemed particularly quiet today -- and he hadn't called them "shitheads" once.

Will nudged Mike, "Does he seem okay to you?" he whispered, nodding his head in Steve's direction.

Mike shrugged in response. He was the only one in the party who hadn't entirely warmed up to Steve yet, and the others couldn't really understand why, though they guessed it had something to do with Steve having been with Nancy for so long.

Will looked at Steve again, concern in his eyes. Thankfully the teen was walking in front of the group and didn't notice this concerned look from Will. ...Or the equally concerned, if a little accusatory, one from Max.

After several more minutes they arrived at the cabin. Steve knocked on the door -- the special knock that Hopper had taught them so that El would know it was safe to open the door.

They waited a few seconds and then the door opened, revealing a smiling Eleven. Hopper had explained to her that she had to stay hidden there for another year, but they made a compromise -- her friends could come any time they wanted. So while her days were still spent alone, her afternoons were spent with the people she cared about most and she was much less lonely than before.

She hugged Mike first, then the others, one-by-one. She hugged Steve a little longer than normal and when she pulled away she looked up at him, tilting her head to the side slightly as she inspected his face.

Steve gave her a confused look and eventually said "...Uh... Hi," feeling slightly uncomfortable. The girl still freaked him out a little bit sometimes. She had a habit of staring at you for what was often a disturbing amount of time.

"Different..." she said. She hadn't looked away from his face, and

Steve could swear she hadn't blinked yet.

"...What?" Steve asked.

"Your different."

"Uh... Okay. ...Can we come in? It's freezing out here."

El nodded and stepped to the side so that her friends could enter the cabin.

As the group walked in, Max locked eyes with Eleven for a moment -- who nodded slightly.

Eleven and Max had become close friends in the past couple months. After El understood that Max liked Lucas and not Mike, she was less closed off to her, and now they were close enough to communicate without using words.

"Alright," said Steve, sitting down on the couch, "What do you wanna do? Movie? Board game? ...Homework?"

"Game!" all the kids said in unison, and Dustin gave Steve a disbelieving look, "Did you just ask me if I wanted to do homework?"

"Hey," Steve replied, "I'm the grown up here. And as a responsible adult," the kids laughed at this. "*As a responsible adult*, I have to at least remind you of the fact that you have homework."

"Don't *you* have homework, too?" Lucas asked. Steve's eyes widened for a second, having been caught off guard, and then quickly changed the subject, "...So what game do you shitheads wanna play?" Which made the kids smirk.

The kids argued for a few minutes, trying to come to an agreement on what game to play.

Steve sat quietly, listening to the kids ramble on, and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and scrunching his eyes closed for a few moments.

Will was the only who noticed this, however, as the others were too

busy arguing.

Eventually Eleven stood up and went over to the bookcase, grabbing the box for Monopoly and bringing it back over to the others.

"Ah, good choice," said Steve, joining the kids on the floor, "a classic."

3. Dustin

They'd played for about an hour before they got bored and abandoned the game.

In his eighteen years of life, Steve was positive he'd never finished a game of monopoly... or heard of anyone else finishing one, either.

Now the kids were watching a movie -- well, at least, a movie was on, but they were mostly talking rather than watching it -- and Steve was in the small kitchen trying to figure out what to make the kids for dinner.

Over the course of the hour he'd been playing with the kids, he'd started feeling worse. He was doing his best to hide it, but as his headache worsened and his voice started to go, he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep this up.

He groaned a little as he looked through the limited contents of the fridge -- there were only a couple crappy looking TV dinners, and a few boxes of Eggos in the freezer.

"How--" the word came out so quiet and choked that the kids didn't hear him. He cleared his throat and tried again, "How's breakfast for dinner sound?"

The kids shrugged indifferently, except for El who was smiling and nodding enthusiastically.

"Eggos it is. Just remember my one rule," Steve said with a small smile, when she wasn't staring at him like the twins from *The Shining*, Eleven was one of the sweetest kids he'd ever met.

"Nobody tells Hopper," the kids all said in unison. Steve had never fed them a balanced dinner -- in fact it was usually just junk food -- but they all knew that if Hopper found out, then they'd probably be stuck eating shitty TV dinners, so they followed Steve's rule.

Dustin was watching Steve worriedly as he stood at the toaster making two whole boxes of Eggos for them. He'd noticed that Steve

wasn't feeling well while they were playing the game. It's not like it was glaringly obvious, it was little things.

He'd been coughing a lot -- at first it seemed like nothing, I mean, people cough, right? -- but after the tenth time it became clear that he wasn't feeling so great.

So Dustin started to stealthily convince the others how boring the game was getting, and how they should watch a movie instead.

El and Will had also evidently noticed that Steve wasn't well, because they both kept giving him concerned looks throughout the game, and as soon as Dustin had started trying to end the game, they quickly jumped on board -- Max, Lucas, and Mike quickly following suit.

"...Something's wrong..." El said softly to the group.

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"With him," she said, looking over at Steve. Max and Will both nodded in agreement.

"He's sick," said Dustin.

"Sick?" El asked.

"Yeah," Dustin said, "You know, like when you have a cold -- you cough a lot and can't really breathe like normal and stuff?"

"He can't breathe?" she said, looking worried.

"No, no," Mike said, "You can still breathe when you have a cold, just not through your nose. --But he seems fine," he continued turning to Dustin, "What're you all so worried about?"

"He's sick, Mike," Dustin said, "Look at him."

"Why don't you like him?" Max said to Mike in a slightly accusatory tone.

"It's not that I don't like him. I just... I dunno. It's weird. He dated Nancy --and now he's our babysitter?" Max rolled her eyes.

"He did seem kinda out of it," Lucas said. Dustin nodded, "Thank you!"

"So what do we do?" asked Will. "Movie," said El.

"Yeah," Max said, "El's right. We should make him sit and watch a movie with us."

"If we're lucky he'll fall asleep," said Lucas, and the kids all nodded in agreement, though Mike still seemed skeptical.

While the kids were talking, Steve had finished making dinner and put a stack of waffles on the middle of the dining table with a stack of plates next to it, and a bottle of maple syrup.

"Food's done!" he called to the kids, who came over to eat -- El running in front of the group and taking a hand full of waffles from the stack, which made Steve laugh a little.

The kids each took a plate and some waffles and found places to sit, as the table wasn't big enough for all of them to sit at.

El and Mike sat across from each other at the table, Max and Lucas sat on the back of the couch, and Dustin and Will sat on the floor.

"Aren't you gonna eat?" Dustin asked looking at Steve, who shook his head a little, "Nah, I'm not really hungry." The kids exchanged glances and Steve gave them a confused look, "What?"

"Nothing," they all replied in unison. "What's with you guys to--" he was interrupted by a forceful sneeze, which only earned more concerned looks from the kids. He sighed, and sniffled a little.

"...Can we watch a movie?" Will asked.

"I thought that's what you guys were doing," said Steve, with a confused expression.

"A different movie," said Max.

Steve shrugged, "Hey, as far as I'm concerned, as long as you stay in the cabin, you can do whatever you want."

4. Mike and Lucas

After they finished eating, the kids dragged Steve over to the couch and forced him to sit down.

They quickly agreed on having a Star Wars marathon -- too quickly, Steve thought. They usually spent several minutes debating things like this, the way they had before when they'd decided to play monopoly.

Eleven put the video in and then sat on the armchair with Mike.

Dustin sat next to Steve on the couch and Will sat next to him.

And Lucas and Max sat together on the floor.

They sat quietly for half the movie, the only sounds from the group being the occasional cough or snuffle from Steve, who was leaning heavily on the arm of the couch.

Max kept handing him the lozenges she'd taken from his glove compartment earlier, earning a few grateful, if tired, smiles from the teen.

He was finding it more and more difficult to hide how shitty he was feeling, especially when all he wanted to do was go to sleep, but he didn't want the kids to worry about him. ...At least, not any more than they already were.

He started to doze off, despite his best efforts to stay awake, but was quickly jolted back awake by a particularly congested sounding sneeze which he stifled into his wrist, followed by a quiet groan and a horse, "Shit."

El nudged Mike with her elbow and nodded in Steve's direction, as if to say "I told you so."

Mike sighed. He knew she was right -- there was no denying the teenager's illness any longer. He looked like shit, and he sounded even worse.

Mike picked up the box of tissues sitting on the side-table next to the armchair he and El were sharing and looked over at the miserable looking babysitter.

"Hey Steve," he said, and Steve looked at him with raised eyebrows, "Heads up."

Mike tossed the box to Steve, who caught it with ease -- even sick as a dog, his athletic instincts took over -- and he gave Mike a tired smile, "Thanks, Wheeler."

Mike nodded in response before turning back to the TV.

They sat quietly again for the rest of the movie, Steve finally falling asleep near the end of it, snoring quietly. The kids all exchanged smiles, their plan had worked.

Dustin and Will got off the couch, and worked together to get Steve's legs onto the couch so that he wouldn't fall off of it in his sleep.

The teenager stretched a little and knocked the box of tissues that Mike had given him off of the couch, but he didn't wake up, and the kids gave a collective sigh of relief.

Lucas noticed that Steve was shivering a little, and grabbed a blanket off of the back of the couch, throwing it over him.

Max smiled and caught Lucas's eye. "What?" he asked, looking at her. She shook her head and rolled her eyes.

The kids sat in silence for a while after that, occasionally looking at Steve to make sure he was alright.

He woke up again half way through the second movie, and looked around at the kids. They were just sitting there, quietly watching a movie, and... did they give him a blanket while he was sleeping?

He smiled, realizing that the kids were taking care of him. It felt a little strange, like he was the one being babysat, rather than being the caretaker. But it didn't bother him as much as he would've thought.

As far as he was concerned, these kids were his family now, and the fact that they cared about him too, made him happy.

He watched the movie for a while, though having missed the first half of it -- and a fair amount of the previous one -- he had no idea what was going on. Why was science fiction so confusing?

The kids seemed to be enjoying it, though, and they were letting him rest, so he had no reason to complain.

He sniffled and grabbed the box of tissues he'd knocked onto the floor in his sleep earlier.

Mike noticed this and stood up. El gave him a confused look, but he just shook his head a little and went into the kitchen.

He returned a few minutes later later with a glass of orange juice that he handed to Steve, who gave the kid a surprised look, "Uh... Thanks."

Mike nodded a little, gave him a quiet, "Don't mention it," and sat back down next to El.

He might not be as happy about Steve being their designated babysitter as the others, but he still felt bad seeing the guy getting his ass kicked by the flu.

It didn't take long for Steve to fall back asleep, and for the kids put in the third and final movie. By now it was around nine and they were expecting Hopper home any minute.

Eleven was a little nervous as to how he might react to the teenager sleeping on the couch -- Jim was still a little apprehensive about Steve, even after he'd protected Mike, Max, Lucas, and Dustin from the demodogs and Max's stepbrother.

"It'll be okay," Mike whispered, as if he'd read her mind. She gave him a small smile and nodded.

They sat and quietly watched the movie for little while longer, when someone knocked on the door. It was the knock that let El know it was safe to open the door, and she unlocked it without getting up.

When the door opened, however, it wasn't Hopper who entered.

5. Joyce

Joyce Byers came walking through the door of the cabin, much to the children's surprise.

"Hey, there!" she said as she closed the door behind her -- to which the kids all scolded "Shh!" in unison. Joyce smiled and held her hands up, as she whispered "Sorry!"

She walked over to the group, hugging Will and kissing the top of his head. Then she looked around at the others, but stopped when she reached Steve, finally noticing the snoring teen on the couch.

She knew he was sick at a first glance -- his cheeks and nose were tinted pink, and he was hugging a box of tissues to his chest the way a young child would hug a teddy bear, while other already used ones were strewn across the floor below him.

She looked at Will with a little concern, "You could have called me."

"We had it under control, Mom," Will told her with a small smile, which she returned with a nod.

Joyce then turned to El, "Does Hop keep a thermometer around here?" El nodded. "Bathroom," she said and stood up, taking Joyce's hand and leading her to the bathroom, even though Joyce had been there many times within the past couple months and knew exactly where she was going.

Joyce looked through the medicine cabinet until she pulled out a small, thin box which she knew would have a thermometer in it.

Eleven put a hand on the woman's arm and looked up at her with wide, concerned eyes. "Where's Hopper?" she asked. "He's alright," Joyce reassured her with a smile, "Just staying late to work on a case. He asked me to come look after you."

El let out a breath of relief and nodded a little, taking Joyce's hand again and leading her back to the living room.

The mother knelt down in front of the still-sleeping teenager, and

placed the thermometer in his mouth. While she waited to get the proper reading from the device, she talked with the kids -- asking what they'd done that afternoon, how AV club went, what sorts of new skateboard tricks Max had learned, if El had read any interesting books -- anything that she knew would interest the children.

After a few minutes, she took the thermometer out of Steve's mouth and see what it had to say. It read at 101.3, which was not the highest fever she'd seen in her eighteen years of being a mother, but it didn't particularly inspire confidence, either. "Hey there," she said, gently patting his face, "Sweetheart, you need to wake up."

Steve stirred and groaned slightly, turning his face away from the woman, starting to wake up a little, but not enough.

"I got this," Max said, kneeling down next to Joyce. "It's fine, Steve," she said with a small smirk, "Just get some sleep, I can drive the boys home."

The eighteen-year-old's eyes shot open and he struggled to sit up, "I'm up... I'm up...!"

He checked his pockets to make sure Max hadn't taken his keys, and sighed in relief when he found them. Then he looked at Max, who had an amused smirk on her face. "Jesus, Max. Don't scare me like that."

He probably would have sounded authoritative if his voice wasn't hoarse from coughing, and thick with congestion; but as it was, Max rolled her eyes and said, "I'm not *that* bad of a driver!" Steve sighed and ran a tired hand down his face, "I'm not having this conversation again."

Joyce placed a gentle hand on the teen's shoulder, which made him jump a little as he hadn't noticed her until then.

"It's okay," she said with a reassuring smile and Steve sighed in relief -- he liked Joyce. She was always nice to him, and she trusted him to take care of Will, which was the highest praise a person could get from her after everything she and that boy had been through.

"Mrs. Byers?" he asked, and she winced sympathetically at the hoarseness of his voice. "I thought Hop--" he tried to continue, but was interrupted by a harsh coughing fit.

Joyce helped him sit up, and sat next to him on the sofa, patting his back gently until he was able to stop. "Hop's working late," she said, and Steve gave her a concerned look. He knew that the lab had been shut down, but if Hopper was working this late, it could mean something was still going on.

Joyce shook her head slightly in response to the boy's look, and he nodded a little, though he wasn't sure if she was trying to say it didn't have to do with the lab, or if she just didn't want to worry the kids.

"I should get going home... I'll drop the others off on the way," Steve said after a minute of silence, starting to stand up. "Is there anybody at home to take care of you?" the mother asked, her eyebrows raised in concern.

Will had told her a little bit about the teenager's home life, and from what she understood, his parents weren't often around.

"I'll be fine," Steve said, though he didn't look entirely convinced himself. Joyce shared a glance with Will, and then El, who both nodded, while the others just looked confused.

"No," Joyce said, having Steve sit back down on the couch, "You're staying here where I can keep an eye on you."

"But Hopper--"

"He'll understand."

"But I--"

"It'll be okay. ...Alright?"

He looked at her for a few moments, not used to being mothered like this, and then nodded. Joyce smiled, "Good."

She then stood up and addressed Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Max. "I should take you four home," she said. The aforementioned children

looked at each other, then at Steve, then back at Joyce, and collectively shook their heads.

Steve smiled a little, but then gave them a stern look, "She's right, you guys need to go home and get some sleep."

"That's what the floor is for," said Dustin dismissively. Steve rolled his eyes and sighed, "Listen, you don't wanna get what I've got; and the longer you stay around me, the worse your odds of catching are."

Max sighed, annoyed by Steve's reasoning. "Well I have an amazing immune system," she cut in, "I haven't even had a cold in over a year. I'm staying here."

The boys all stared at her in horror, and Lucas elbowed her in the arm. "Ow!" she said, looking at Lucas, "What was that for?"

"You just jinxed yourself!" Lucas, Dustin, Will, and Mike said in unison.

El looked around the group in confusion, wondering what being jinxed meant. She caught Steve's eye, and he shook his head with an expression that clearly said "Don't listen to them." She smiled a little and nodded.

Max rolled her eyes, "Even if I *did* jinx myself -- which I didn't because that's not real -- I'd rather get the flu than go home and deal with Billy."

That was hard to argue with, Steve thought. He felt like complete shit, but he preferred the flu to seeing Max's stepbrother, too.

Joyce smiled at the group. She hadn't realized just how close the kids had gotten to their designated babysitter/big brother, and she found it heartwarming how much they all cared.

"...Okay," she said after a few moments, "All of you, go call your parents and them your sleeping over. --But make sure you tell them you're at my house, not here."

The kids ran to and gathered around the phone, except for El and Will, Joyce went into the kitchen and rummaged through the

cabinets, and Steve curled up on the couch again -- feeling like part of a family for the first time in a long time.

6. Nancy and the Recovery

Author's Note: Here's the final chapter! This was super fun to write, and I'm so happy you're all enjoying this as much as I enjoyed writing it! Thank you so much for all the favorites and follows, and the lovely reviews! They mean so much to me!

Until the next fic!

-LizzySong

It didn't take long for the kids to set up pillows and blankets on the floor, and to get ready for bed.

Joyce had found what she was looking for in the kitchen and went back to the teenager curled up on the couch, handing him a small medicine cup filled with liquid cold medicine. He sat up a little, taking the cup from her. He looked at it skeptically and then back at her, making her smile a little, "It'll help, I promise."

He nodded and swallowed it as quickly as he could, like he was doing a shot of tequila, shuddering involuntarily at the taste. Joyce took the empty cup from him when he'd finished, and placed it on the side table that was half-way between the armchair and the sofa. "Now just try and get some sleep, okay?"

Steve nodded again and laid back down. The mother gave his shoulder a comforting squeeze, then pulled the blanket closer around his shoulders with a slightly sad smile, "Good."

After a short while Steve and all the kids were asleep, and Joyce was sitting in the armchair, reading a book she'd found on the bookshelf.

At around midnight there was a knock at the door -- the one that meant it was safe to open it. Joyce stood up and made her way to the door, careful not to step on any of the children on the way.

She shushed Hopper as he walked in, and he looked around the room with an expression mixed with confusion and irritation. "Joyce, what the hell is--" he started, but Joyce cut him off. "He's sick," she said.

"Who's sick?"

"Steve. He has the flu -- it's pretty bad."

"And that means he has to spend the night on my couch?"

"He doesn't have anybody to take care of him at home, Hop."

Hopper sighed. He knew that Joyce felt responsible for the boy -- whenever she saw someone who she thought needed mothering, she didn't shy away from the task. She'd always been that way; it was one of the things he loved about her. ...But it could be a bit annoying at times

"...And the kids?" he asked, referring to Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Max -- he was expecting Will to be there. "They didn't want to leave him," she said. Jim nodded a little, and headed for the kitchen, followed by Joyce. He grabbed two cans of beer out of the fridge, handing one to Joyce who took it with a smile.

By the time Steve woke up the next morning, all the kids -- except for El of course -- were already gone. He groaned a little and put a hand to his head, feeling even worse than he had last night.

As he took in his surroundings he noticed that the tv was on and that Eleven was sitting on the floor in front of the couch, watching it.

The teen sighed and slowly sat up, then suddenly bent forward letting out a violent sneeze, which made El jump. "Sorry," he said with a sniffle, and the girl shook her head. "It's okay," she said, and handed him a box of tissues which he took gratefully, "Thanks."

Joyce came over to the two, she'd been sitting at the table near the kitchen for the past couple hours, having taken the kids to school earlier that morning.

She sat next to Steve on the couch and handed him a glass of water. "...What time is it?" he asked, taking a sip of water. "Ten... four... five," Eleven said, looking up at him from her spot on the floor.

Steve choked on his water, which led to a coughing fit. "Shit," he said between coughs, "I'm so late..."

"Don't worry," Joyce said, placing a reassuring hand on boy's back, "I called the school and told them you won't be coming in for a few days." Steve looked at her with surprise, "Y-you did...?" Joyce smiled a little and nodded, "Of course I did." Steve returned the smile, "...Thank you."

They sat and watched TV with Eleven for a while before Steve left to go home, insisting that he didn't want to be a bother. Joyce tried to convince him to stay, but he wouldn't hear it, and eventually she compromised, sending him home with a bottle of cold medicine and making him promise not to go to school until he felt better.

By the time four o'clock came around, Steve was curled up on his own couch, in his own home, fast asleep. His parents were out of town -- for the second time in the last three months -- so he'd decided to camp out in the living room instead of hiding in his bedroom until he was better like he normally would.

He was harshly woken up by the loud ring of the doorbell. "Yeah... yeah, I'm coming, I'm coming..." he groaned as he stood up and stumbled to the door.

When he opened it he was surprised at who he saw standing in front of him. "Nancy?" he asked, "What are you doing here?"

She seemed a little uncomfortable and she wasn't meeting his eyes. "...The kids told me you were sick," she said, looking behind her at her car. Following her gaze, Steve could see that Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Max were getting out of her car, clearly arguing about something.

"They wanted to see you," she continued, "I hope that's okay..." Steve smiled and nodded a little, "Yeah... Yeah, it's fine."

The kids came up to the door, crowding around Steve, chattering away the same way they always did when he picked them up from school. The boys were asking him to settle a debate about something that happened in AV club, while Max was trying to tell them to "Shut the hell up!"

Steve looked at the boys with a mixture of amusement and

bewilderment, "I have absolutely no idea what the hell any of that means, so if you want me to settle this for you, then you're gonna have to settle it my way."

"What?" Mike said, "With basketball or something?" Steve nodded, "Yeah, that's right. If you don't shut up about whatever this is, then I'm gonna make you three play basketball to settle it." The boys immediately stopped arguing and headed into the house and toward the kitchen, making both Max and Steve laugh.

"Your brother's a nerd," said Steve with a smile, turning back to Nancy, who laughed slightly, "Believe me, I know."

They stood in awkward silence for a minute before Nancy spoke again, "Steve, are you... okay?"

"I mean, I've felt better..."

"No, that's not-- I didn't mean because of the flu... I meant... I mean, we didn't really get the chance to talk about what happened and I--"

"Nance, it's okay. Really. I'm fine. I'm... I'm glad your happy." He gave her a small, but reassuring smile, "--Did you wanna come in? Or just leave me alone, in charge of four kids while I'm at death's door?" he teased, and Nancy shook her head a little. "I can't. I have..." she trailed off and Steve nodded, "Gotcha."

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. You don't have anything to be sorry about."

She smiled slightly, "...I'll come get the kids around nine, okay?"

"Sounds good."

She nodded once and started walking back to her car, but stopped half-way and turned around when she heard a, "Hey, Nance?" come from the doorway. "Yeah?" she asked.

"Have fun, okay?"

She smiled and called back, "You, too. ...And Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't over dose on cough medicine like last time, okay?"

He laughed a little, "Yeah, okay."

The next week went something like this, with someone coming to check on him at least once a day.

Sometimes it was the kids after school on their way to the cabin; sometimes it was Joyce -- usually checking to make sure he was getting enough rest, and ironically waking him up by coming to check on him a couple times.

One time it was Jonathan, sent by Joyce to drop off Steve's homework when she found out no one had done so already. They both were sure that this was the most awkward five minutes of their lives.

And a few times it was Nancy, insisting that she help him catch up on the growing mountain of homework he'd been ignoring, because she hated the thought of him not graduating just because he'd been sick -- which he was grateful for, even though he thought she was over exaggerating.

And by the next Monday, he was ready to get back to his life, maybe with a little less vigor -- and a little less hairspray -- than normal, but ready non-the-less.

He picked the kids up and took them to El's like he always did on Mondays, and surprised them all by suggesting they play in the woods for a while.

Eleven looked up at him with excitement and apprehension, and asked, "Why?"

"Because I just spent the last week doing pretty much nothing but watch TV, and if that was my life for a whole year, I think I'd go insane. So go run around for a while and get some fresh air. Just stay where I can see you, and--"

"--Don't tell Hopper," she said with a smile, and hugged him as tightly

as she could.

Steve hugged her back and smiled, he finally understood her -- to some extent at least -- and he wanted to help her however he could. And if that meant letting the kid run around the woods for a couple hours with her friends, then so be it.

...He just hoped Hopper wouldn't find out, because he wasn't sure he would be able to survive that.